

## Executive Summary

The Fund’s Educator Advisory Committee (EAC) is a yearlong initiative that brings together over 30 school leaders monthly to provide educator feedback on The Fund’s work. The program aims to shape The Fund’s policy agenda, offer recommendations on programming, and facilitate connections with other leaders across the city.

In the 2023-24 school year, the EAC engaged in policy exploration and development to create this memo. The leaders on the EAC chose to focus on the issue of staffing shortages, which was one of the most salient issues they identified that affected their day-to-day work. This memo summarizes the issue of educator shortages through data and principal stories, and offers recommendations from school leader experiences that will help to address some of the short-term drivers of classroom vacancies.

## Context of Staffing Shortages

### Data Around Staffing Shortages

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) vacancy data reveals shortages across many full-time educator positions. Staff vacancy rates vary cyclically across school years, with the lowest rates generally in December as vacancies from the start of the year are filled. In recent years, the December vacancy rate was around 2 to 3%; the rate in December 2023 was 5.9%.

This challenge is not evenly distributed across schools in CPS. The Fund identifies a subset of “Priority Schools”<sup>1</sup> with higher-than-average student turnover. The vacancy rate in these schools as of December 2023 was 6.3%, compared with 3.9% in non-Priority Schools; this gap has increased over the past five years. The data shows particular shortages in positions serving Diverse Learners (DLs) and English Learners (ELs). Across the district, 8.0% of DL teacher positions were vacant, while 8.7% of positions serving ELs were vacant.

### School Leaders’ Experiences with Shortages

This data corresponds to the experiences of CPS school leaders. Members of the EAC deemed staff shortages the policy priority they were most interested in researching over the course of this school year. In discussions around the topic, a majority of members shared that they felt they spent too much time working through the related processes of hiring staff, finding substitutes, and shuffling existing staff to cover vacancies as a last resort. Their experiences around this issue and discussions to identify root causes led to the recommendations below.

It is important to note that the time and effort school leaders put into dealing with vacancies takes them away from other vital aspects of their job. CPS principals are the primary individuals tasked with instructional leadership, strategic planning, and general administration of their schools, and EAC

<sup>1</sup> Priority Schools are defined as those experiencing high churn or high student mobility, as defined in research from the University of Illinois Chicago, and low culture and climate scores, as measured by the University of Chicago 5Essentials Survey.

members emphasized that the time they spend on addressing staff shortages is necessarily time taken away from these core duties. They shared that this reallocation of time significantly affects their job satisfaction, and can lead to frustration and burnout in their roles.

### **Existing Efforts to Address Shortages**

In recent years, there have been policy efforts to address teacher shortages at multiple levels. In Illinois, recent state-level initiatives have included a \$45 million [Teacher Vacancy Grant Pilot Program](#), created in 2023 to focus resources on filling vacancies in 170 districts with the most open positions. Several changes in state law have aimed to address shortages as well; these have included measures to reduce licensure fees, expand eligibility for certain education positions, and increase teacher pay.

CPS has been a leader in pipeline efforts, notably through [Teach Chicago](#), a multifaceted initiative aimed at attracting and retaining highly qualified, diverse teachers for every classroom in Chicago. Aspects of this program include centralized recruitment efforts through the [Opportunity Schools](#) initiative, a [teacher residency program](#) that streamlines the path for classroom support roles to obtain certification, and a [grow-your-own initiative](#) that helps CPS students build a bridge to careers as teachers in the district.

## **Recommendations**

### **Growing the Educator Pipeline in Needed Areas**

Staffing shortages in CPS and elsewhere are fundamentally driven by a lack of properly qualified and credentialed teachers emerging from educator preparation programs (EPPs). Policy changes to address the root causes of this extremely broad issue are beyond the scope of the EAC; instead, members chose to focus on subject areas where shortages are particularly acute, namely those serving DLs and ELs, as well as on schools where historical disinvestment has made it more difficult to fill positions. Because of the various certifications and endorsements in these fields and their application to different roles, school leaders often felt they were looking for a “unicorn” - a candidate with very specific qualifications to fit a position at their school. Building the pipeline in these necessary areas will require cooperation between CPS and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the state agency responsible for certifying educators.

#### ***Diverse Learner Educators***

*Context:* Conditions contributing to the growing educator pipeline include a shortage of teachers experienced in working with DLs. This scarcity of qualified educators has led to significant learning gaps for students requiring specialized support, particularly in schools lacking resources to meet diverse needs. Financial barriers further hinder educators from accessing necessary coursework and professional development (PD) opportunities in DL education, exacerbating the shortage of qualified teachers.

*Recommendations:* EPPs should incorporate more DL coursework into general education certification programs. ISBE should work with EPPs to develop and publicize low-cost pathways to DL certification for already-licensed educators looking to develop new competencies. The district should focus on embedding year-long PD for on topics such as developing and monitoring individualized education

programs (IEPs) into all early CPS teachers' requirements, and providing support for new teachers in building these competencies to ensure they are meeting expectations. Encouraging experienced educators to mentor newer ones will also help to cultivate needed skills among newer teachers.

### ***Bilingual Educators***

*Context:* In many ways, the shortage in teachers serving English learners (ELs) mirrors that of DL teachers. As the number of ELs CPS serves has increased, the number of qualified and credentialed teachers to fill these positions has not kept pace. EAC members overwhelmingly cited the lack of qualified candidates as the most pressing problem when looking to fill EL-related roles. As the number of ELs in CPS continues to increase, state and local authorities will need to identify ways to build a more robust pipeline to serve these students.

*Recommendations:* EPPs can integrate more coursework focusing on ELs, which can both improve general classroom teachers' ability to work with these students and better prepare interested candidates for receiving EL-related endorsements. At the same time, CPS has a wealth of staff, volunteers, family members, and even students who are already fluent in languages other than English, and in many cases have skills to serve in schools in various capacities, but may lack the necessary credentials to become full-time EL educators. In these cases, the district can develop programs to help these potential candidates meet the formal requirements necessary to enter the EL pipeline and build the pool. The state and district can also build on successful partnerships with countries like Spain and the Philippines to source additional educators with native fluency in target languages. Finally, on the related issue of newcomers, the state and district should identify and promulgate best practices on helping new students adapt to the expectations of the school system.

### ***Staffing Incentives***

*Context:* Although staffing shortages affect all schools and subject areas, they are most acute in schools and positions serving students that have historically been furthest from opportunity. Recognizing this, CPS has instituted several incentive programs to help fill these positions and better serve these students. In EAC members' experiences, these incentives were generally successful in drawing qualified candidates to schools or positions that would otherwise be more difficult to fill. However, cuts to these programs driven by a more constrained budget could lead to inequity, especially as the new budget model allows greater flexibility for all schools to hire the candidates of their choice.

*Recommendations:* To forestall this potential inequity, CPS should continue and expand its incentive structures to ensure positions in under-resourced areas are filled. The district can use its Opportunity Index to weight support for filling positions in specific schools and geographic areas, and provide subsidies for schools seeking to fill roles in shortage subject areas. CPS should work with educators to develop programs that reward multi-year commitments to positions in shortage areas, and ensure such programs will not conflict with existing or future teacher contracts. The district can also create cohorts for PD opportunities that meet specific school needs.

## Facilitating the Hiring and Support of New Teachers

CPS' hiring, onboarding, and retaining of teachers represents the next phase of the educator pipeline and includes a number of challenges. Given the complexity of these processes and the number of different entities involved (including school leaders, various CPS Central Office departments, and human resources business partners (HRBPs)), communication and alignment is essential to ensure the most efficient and effective support for teaching candidates. Members of the EAC indicated several areas where district staff can improve processes and take advantage of opportunities to ease this process for all involved.

### ***Job Descriptions***

*Context:* Many teaching candidates' first interaction with CPS is reading the job description for a position posting. However, EAC members shared that in their experience, job descriptions vary widely in level of detail from school to school and need to be updated to match current terminology used by CPS, ISBE, EPPs, and other entities. The members questioned how often candidates refer to the current job descriptions, either because they are overwhelmingly long and specific or because they do not accurately reflect the actual experience of a position.

*Recommendations:* A regular audit schedule for the district's standard job descriptions will help to ensure these descriptions continue to match the actual duties and requirements of CPS educators. This process will best be conducted with the help of those educators, who can best provide insight into the day-to-day experiences their jobs entail. The schedule can be designed to have reviews coincide with major changes by ISBE, new CTU contracts, and other shifts that could affect the necessary language in job descriptions.

### ***Hiring Communications***

*Context:* EAC members flagged communication with CPS Central Office and HRBPs as key to a successful hiring process. With the SNOW ticketing system the primary method for communication between principals and district administration on matters related to hiring, it is important that the system be made as user-friendly as possible. EAC members generally felt that the system created a norm of non-personal and non-collaborative communication, and focused too much on ticket clearance rates rather than actually assisting school leaders. An additional barrier to productive communication is confusion around the correct person to contact in a given situation, and frequently the inability to directly reach that person. Under this framework, principals feel that trying to communicate with Central Office becomes a task in itself, one that takes time and energy away from their primary duties and leaves classrooms uncovered for longer periods of time.

*Recommendations:* There are additional opportunities to foster productive communication through the ticketing system, such as allowing for regular back-and-forth communication on the same ticket and identifying certain situations where a direct phone call becomes the default mode of communication. Allowing principals the primary prerogative to close tickets and attaching metrics to principal satisfaction, rather than ticket clearance rates, could improve responsiveness in the system. For more direct communication, several members shared that a simplified flow chart or "if-then" document,

identifying a direct contact for various scenarios and reflecting up-to-date roles and responsibilities, would help them better interact with Central Office. As a backup, Network offices could offer additional communication liaison support, coinciding with peak times in the hiring season, to help cut through red tape. Overall, school leaders recommend a greater focus on personalized communication to expedite the resolution of hiring and other HR issues.

### ***Onboarding Process and Dashboard***

*Context:* The onboarding process is an area of mixed feelings for EAC members, with some successful practices and some frustrations. Overall, there is a sense that the number and length of tasks involved in onboarding is preventing candidates from beginning their roles in a timely fashion, or is causing them to drop out of the process. These obstacles are especially salient for mid-year hires, who do not have the summer to complete these steps, and are often needed to fill an immediate vacancy. School leaders largely cited the hiring dashboard as helpful, but noted that it is sometimes out of date. These delays contribute to staffing vacancies, as candidates are held up in the process for longer than necessary.

*Recommendations:* A clear and up-to-date list of steps a candidate must take to complete onboarding will be helpful for navigating this process. With this clarity, CPS could identify steps that could be taken at the time of application, rather than after hiring, such as tuberculosis screening and credential checks, so that newly hired educators can get in the classroom as soon as possible. To the extent that onboarding steps require input from ISBE, CPS should develop a working relationship with ISBE's satellite office in Chicago to expedite these transactions. Again, most of all, personal communication from Central Office and the HRBP, such as phone calls and office hours, will be helpful in helping new teachers into their roles efficiently.

### ***New Teacher Support***

*Context:* A crucial component to reducing vacancies is retaining high-quality educators in their positions. In particular, retaining new teachers is as important to the educator pipeline as attracting and hiring them in the first place. EAC members shared that many teachers leave after a few years in a role (or less) because of mismatched expectations or lack of support. This heightened turnover makes principals engage in repetitive hiring cycles to fill the same role year after year (or even within the same year), and creates damaging instability in classrooms.

*Recommendations:* Many existing CPS initiatives to support these new educators should be continued and expanded. For example, EAC leaders were near unanimous in their support of the teacher residency program, and suggested that it should be grown in future years. Centralized recruitment through the Opportunity Schools program has also shown promise in retaining educators in their roles. Other suggestions included supporting new teachers through professional learning communities (PLCs), robust mentoring support for at least two school years, and PD and networking events that allow them to support each other as cohorts. This could include a new teacher summit and other social events planned at the district level.

### **Temporary Teachers**

*Context:* Regardless of the success of any of these measures, schools will continue to need various types of temporary teachers to fill classrooms left vacant by unforeseeable circumstances. EAC members have struggled with substitute and temporary teachers who lack relevant experience or skills, especially in classrooms that serve students that require specialized knowledge or training. On the other hand, school leaders praised their cadre subs and longer-term temporarily-assigned teachers (TATs), who gain familiarity with a specific campus and provide stability for principals and students alike.

*Recommendations:* CPS should continue to source substitutes from as wide a pool as possible, including from EPPs and from the retired educator workforce, when possible. Substitutes should be trained centrally to a standard that will allow them to take on all the relevant duties of a classroom. Longer-term positions like cadres and TATs should be developed and given consistent placements whenever possible as part of the hiring and onboarding process before they receive a school placement. The district should work with teachers and school leaders to determine whether waivers of certain credentials are allowable or appropriate in certain circumstances to aid in temporarily filling hard-to-staff roles.

### **Conclusion**

As stated above, addressing shortages in the educator pipeline is a broad task, and many efforts to make positive change will only bear fruit years later as potential educators work their way through the pipeline. With that in mind, the EAC has identified these recommendations as relatively short-term steps that local, state, and private actors can take to confront immediate pain points they have encountered in their efforts to staff their schools.

As the leaders most directly responsible for filling staff vacancies, school leaders offer a valuable perspective on these challenges. CPS principals in particular feel the effects of staff shortages, as they are afforded a unique level of autonomy in hiring teachers by state law and district practice. For this reason, Chicago's school leaders are particularly invested in finding solutions to these problems, and look forward to working with policymakers to further develop, advocate for, and implement the recommendations in this document.